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ABSTRACT

This document presents results of a survey involving 400 homeless families on a number of social and economic factors, including family structure, housing history, employment background, educational attainment, and various interpersonal problems. The study sought to gain a greater understanding of the demographics surrounding homelessness. Findings include the following items: (1) almost 100 percent of the homeless families were headed by single women, the majority of whom were under age 25; (2) families had an average of two children; (3) 20 percent of the families had at least one child in foster care; (4) those heads of household who had passed in and out of the foster care system as children subsequently suffered greater degrees of deprivation and poverty than those parents who did not have foster care histories; (5) the majority of homeless families had little or no access to health care, the deprivation of which disproportionately affects children; (6) almost 45 percent of the families had never been primary tenants, and an additional 25 percent had been evicted from their last apartment primarily as a result of obvious financial problems; and (7) the majority of families lacked strong support systems or the independent living skills necessary to face the challenges of urban poverty. The report concludes with a description of the Homes for the Homeless Residential Independent Living service model program. Four tables provide statistical data. (GLR)

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A Profile of Homelessness in New York City

April 1992

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HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS
Serving Homeless Children and Their Families

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WHO ARE HOMELESS FAMILIES?
A Profile of Homelessness in New York City

Homes for the Homeless recently surveyed 400 homeless families on a number of social and economic factors including family structure, housing history, employment background, educational attainment, and various interpersonal problems. The purpose of this survey was to gain a greater understanding of the demographics surrounding homelessness. The general findings of the survey, along with several policy implications, are outlined below.

A Family Profile

While simple demographics do not tell the whole story about homeless families, they do begin to indicate the reasons this phenomenon will not easily or quickly disappear. A demographic profile of the homeless families surveyed is presented in Table 1. Almost 100 percent of all families were headed by single women. The majority of these single mothers were younger than 25 years of age, with the average age of 22. Most of these families have never had a traditional family structure with almost 90 percent reporting never having been married. African-Americans constituted the largest ethnic group among the families; two-thirds were African-Americans, roughly one-fourth were Hispanic, and less than seven percent were White or from other ethnic groups.

TABLE 1: Profile of Homeless Families: Characteristics of Heads of Household

Characteristics	N=400
Head of Household	
Female	97%
Average Age	22 yrs
Age Range	17 to 50
Under 25	56%
25 and Over	44%
Marital Status	
Single	87%
Married	13%
Ethnic Group	
African-American	70%
Hispanic	23%
White	4%
Other	3%

TABLE 2: Profile of Homeless Families: Characteristics of Children

Characteristics	N=880
Children	
Average Number per Family	2
Average Age	3.7 yrs
Range of Children's Ages	
Under 6 years	78%
6 years and Over	22%
Sex of Children	
Female	51%
Male	49%

The Children

Children are often the hidden, silent homeless. Nonetheless they constitute the largest and fastest growing segment of the homeless population. The survey showed that children comprise two-thirds of all individuals living in Homes for the Homeless's facilities (see Table 2). Families had an average of 2 children each, while the actual number ranged from one the seven children per family. Of the roughly 880 children living in Homes for the Homeless's Residential Independent Living Centers (RILs) at the time of the survey, 78 percent were under the age of six.

These demographic details about children and their families begin to underscore a disturbing trend in the fabric of poverty-stricken families which has gone unnoticed or ignored in policy discussions regarding homeless families.

A Fragmented Family Structure

The individuals surveyed gave information from which fragmented family histories emerged. As previously mentioned, almost all families were headed by very young, single mothers. One out of every five families had at least one child in foster care. More astounding, over one-third had an active case of child abuse with NYC's Child Welfare Administration. The instability of today's homeless children is rooted in the histories of their parents: one out of every five heads of household lived in foster care as children. Furthermore, most families described histories filled with exposure to domestic violence, substance abuse, violent crimes and most prevalent of all—poverty.

The Foster Care Linchpin

As implied above, the survey uncovered intergenerational effects between poverty and foster care. Those heads of household who passed in and out of the foster care system as children suffered greater degrees of deprivation and poverty than those parents who did not have foster care histories (see Table 3). The survey revealed that those individuals with foster care histories became parents at a younger age, and on average had more children. They were also more likely to have been pregnant or to have had newborn children in the year prior to becoming homeless. However, nowhere is the correlation more disturbing than the fact that parents with foster care histories were more than twice as likely to have had their children placed in foster care and to have an open case for child abuse with the Child Welfare Administration.

Histories of foster care have further repercussions on the ability of these adults to function as productive members of society. Parents with foster care histories had a higher percentage of chronic problems when compared to heads of household who did not have such histories. For example, 81 percent of the heads of household with foster care histories reported a substance abuse history, 60 percent suffer from domestic violence and 18 percent have a history of mental illness.

The survey also demonstrated a strong correlation between having a foster care history and the ability to secure employment; less than 20 percent of all parents with foster care histories have ever held a job for more than one year as compared to 45 percent for parents without foster care histories.

TABLE 3: Characteristics of Heads of Household: History of Foster Care as Child vs. No History

Characteristics (N=400)	Foster Care History	No History
Average Age of Mother	22 yrs	25 yrs
Employment		
Previous Work Experience	18%	45%
Social Welfare Indicators		
Substance Abuse History	81%	69%
Domestic Violence History	60%	41%
Pregnant or Recent Birth	60%	47%
Mental Illness History	18%	9%
Previously Homeless	36%	19%
Children		
Average Number of Children	3	2
Have Children in Foster Care	27%	15%
Have Active Case with CWA *	73%	30%

*Child Welfare Agency

The Health and Social Welfare of Homeless Families

The majority of homeless families have little or no access to health care, the deprivation of which disproportionately affects children. This lack of health care affects children even before they are born. While nearly half of all women surveyed under the age of 25 were either currently pregnant or had newborn babies, 33 percent reported not having received any prenatal care before entering the shelter system (see Table 4). For those receiving prenatal medical services, the frequency and quality of such care was difficult to quantify. Anecdotal information indicates that care was sporadic and usually not begun until late in pregnancy. This is not difficult to believe especially when the infant mortality rate among New York City's homeless population is more than double that of the population in general.[1]

Many children also suffer from a variety of health problems common among poor children, but made chronic from a lack of medical attention. Asthma, gastrointestinal infections, ear disorders, and dermatological problems occur at more than double the rate among homeless children when compared to children of a similar socioeconomic status.[2]

Likewise, one out of every ten heads of household surveyed reported having their own chronic health problems which includes the increasing number of parents who are HIV positive. However, substance abuse is by far the most detrimental and common problem among homeless families. Over 70 percent of families reported histories of drug and alcohol abuse. Domestic violence is also prevalent among homeless families--close to 45 percent of all families surveyed had been victims of this detrimental violence, with one out of ten having temporarily lived in a battered women's shelter. Even more telling, 23 percent stated that domestic violence was the primary cause of their homelessness. The survey also found a strong correlation between substance abuse and domestic violence, with over one-third of all families reporting them as interrelated problems.

TABLE 4: Profile of Homeless Families: Selected Characteristics

Characteristics	N=400
Education	
Less than HS Diploma	63%
HS Graduate or GED	37%
Vocational or Tech School	13%
Employment	
Currently Working	3%
Previous Work Experience	40%
Housing History	
Have Had Own Apartment	44%
Doubled-Up in Past Year	78%
Have Been Homeless Before	21%
Social Welfare Indicators	
Substance Abuse History	71%
Domestic Violence History	43%
Pregnant or Recent Birth	49%
Mental Illness History	10%
Chronic Illness	12%
In Foster Care as Child	20%
Children	
Active Case with CWA *	35%
Have Children in Foster Care	19%

* Child Welfare Agency

[1] Rafferty, Yvonne, Ph.D. "The Impact of Homelessness on Children". The Advocate.

[2] Ibid.

Housing Experiences of Homeless Families

The turbulent experiences of homeless families are further dramatized when their housing histories are taken into account. Almost 45 percent of the families surveyed had never been primary tenants. Most mothers age out of childhood or the foster care system and establish their own families without having developed the skills to live independently. An additional 25 percent had been evicted from their last apartment primarily due to obvious financial problems. However, many times these financial problems mask the underlying socioeconomic causes of their poverty and homelessness. One out of every five families has been homeless before their most recent stay; close to half of these families have been homeless a number of times.

Most families pass through a period of doubling-up with relatives and friends before becoming homeless and seeking shelter. The survey found that almost 80 percent had been doubled-up prior to seeking transitional shelter; over 40 percent indicated that they had been doubled-up at least twice before becoming homeless. This indicates that families have gone into the shelter system as a last resort after trying every available alternative.

Where Do We Go From Here?: Policy Implications for the Provision of Temporary Housing

The complexities of how to effectively address the needs of homeless families—given their dependency on the social safety net—set the stage for one of the most challenging public policy issues today. The majority of families lack strong support systems or the independent living skills necessary to face the challenges of urban poverty. Many families have never had their own apartment, have low educational attainment and most have never held a steady job. They are all dependent in some way on public support. In addition, they are plagued by chronic health and social problems, with children suffering the most dramatic effects of a lack of adequate health care. Most parents have a substance abuse problem and histories of domestic violence. The basic, human struggle to keep a family together is further debilitated within the environs of violence, child abuse, and foster care.

This disturbing trend in the fabric and make-up of homeless families as revealed by the demographic data indicates that simply providing shelter to homeless families as the medium to obtain permanent housing is to ignore the true problems faced by these families. While shelters can provide a clean and safe environment, what is necessary is a variety of services and programs to provide families with the opportunity to build sound, independent living skills, complete education, and obtain job training. Not shelters, but rather Residential Independent Living Centers (RILs) are required to deliver a service intervention plan. Through RILs, desperately needed services such as health care, counseling, and substance abuse treatment can be easily and economically provided. Educational programs such as living skills workshops for adults, or after-school accelerated learning programs for children will be immediately accessible, and responsive to the needs of parents and children.

The Homes for the Homeless RIL Model

Since 1986, Homes for the Homeless has served roughly 5,600 families and 13,200 children. Over this six year period statistics have shown that about 16 percent of all families have minimal needs and are ready to move directly to permanent housing. Conversely, an astounding 84 percent of all families have had a need for intensive services in one or more of the problems described by the survey. In response to this, Homes for the Homeless has developed an effective Residential Independent Living (RIL) service model which consists of:

- **Needs Assessment:** a service plan is developed for each family upon entry, taking into account the unique and individual needs of the family.
- **Health Services:** complete medical evaluations and preventive services including pre-natal care for pregnant woman and immunizations for children are perfunctory at all RILss upon entrance.
- **Educational Enhancement:** on-sight Alternative High Schools help adults complete their GEDs; early childhood development centers provide preschoolers with a jump start on their education using the 'High Scope' model; after-school accelerated learning programs supplement the education of students and allow them to catch up with their peers; recreation programs including sports teams and theater and dance classes enhance the creative and socialization skills of the children.
- **Foster Care Prevention:** an innovative crisis nursery provides a safe haven for children at-risk of child abuse; intensive family counseling and crisis intervention services are made available to parents and children which prevents at-risk families from having their children placed into foster care.
- **Substance Abuse Treatment**: on-site substance abuse treatment and parent counseling encourage family preservation in a supportive setting by including children in therapy, unlike many programs which remove children from the family.
- **Independent Living Skills:** through PLUS (Practical Living/Useful Skills) workshops that address issues such as parenting, domestic violence, child development, self-esteem, housing maintenance, and budgeting assist families in developing the skills necessary to function autonomously once they have been placed in permanent housing.
- **Employment Training:** an apprenticeship and employment training program are designed to give adults the motivation, knowledge, and experience they need to move from welfare to workfare.
- **Post Placement Services:** in the PLUS In New Communities program(PLUS INC), caseworkers visit familes for up to a year and offer counseling, client advocacy and linkages to available comunity resources.

Success can only be achieved by acknowledging and understanding the scope and magnitude of the problems homeless families must overcome. By accepting that the sole provision of permanent housing is not the answer, models such as the RIL become the obvious mechanism to address the severe poverty faced by homeless families in the 1990's. The success of such an approach can be demonstrated by the fact that while New York City's return rate to the shelter system for families who have been placed in permanent housing is estimated at 50 percent, approximately 94 percent of all families who have gone through a Homes for the Homeless RIL have stayed in permanent housing. Effective transitional housing—or Residential Independent Living Centers—make the difference.

Homes for the Homeless is the largest provider of transitional housing and services for homeless families in New York City. Since our inception in 1986, we have served over 5,600 families including over 13,200 children. Our goal is to break the cycle of poverty and ensure a future for our children.

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